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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000585

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TAGS: [AM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)  
SUBJECT: GEGHARKUNIK MARZ PREPARES FOR ELECTIONS

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Classified By: IO Liz Zentos, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Post dispatched two officers on April 26 and 27 to the Gegharkunik region, which wraps around Armenia's largest body of water -- Lake Sevan. Gegharkunik region, like every other region of Armenia outside of the capitol, is in dire economic straits. Summer tourism to Lake Sevan, potato farming, and poaching what remains of the lake,s depleted fish stock makes up the region,s economy. Residents planned to vote, but had little hope that the elections would change their living conditions. While government representatives told us everything was going smoothly and they had received no complaints, opposition leaders reported that they faced various obstacles in advance of the elections. Virtually everyone told us that the biggest problem facing the region was the socio-economic situation, but candidates lacked specific plans for how to fix the situation. END SUMMARY.

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GOAM REPRESENTATIVES SAY ELECTION WILL BE FREE AND FAIR ...  
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12. (C) Virtually all government representatives we met with assured us the election would be free and fair and that no violations had been reported in the region. The mayor of Sevan told us that the situation in his district was calm and that he had received no complaints from any parties or candidates. Similarly, one of the local election commission chairmen repeatedly assured us that everything was going according to schedule and the vote would be free and fair. He profusely thanked the United States and international observers for their work, and declared that, in order to be a great country, Armenia needed clean elections. Regional marzpet (governor) Arsen Grigoryan commented that the population was interested and that the turn-out would be normal, but that the losers would undoubtedly file complaints after the elections were over.

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... WHILE THE OPPOSITION PAINTS A VERY DIFFERENT PICTURE  
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13. (C) Gavar's opposition leaders told us that the election could already be considered unfair. During a joint meeting with a number of opposition members, including representatives of Stepan Demirchian's People's Party of Armenia, Artashes Geghamian's National Unity party, and Aram Karapetian's New Times Party, we were told that Gavar TV had denied opposition parties air time, that people's passports were being collected to intimidate them into voting for the Republican Party, and that the election lists had been not been changed since the previous elections. The representatives were short on details to support these allegations, however. When asked whether Gavar TV had

registered to air election advertisements, the representatives responded that they believed they had seen advertisements for pro-government candidates on the station. (NOTE: Gavar TV told us they had not registered to air political advertisements, and had accordingly aired none. END NOTE.) The opposition activists could not estimate how many passports had been collected. Asked whether they had registered a complaint about the situation, they said they had reported the problem to their party headquarters and were awaiting further instructions from their leadership. When we compared their copies of voter lists for this election and the last one, we saw that the numbers were very similar, but not identical as they had claimed. We also asked whether the local opposition parties were working together. We were told they were, but the party members could not provide us with any details.

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REPUBLIC PARTY HAS NOT SEEN ANY VIOLATIONS YET  
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14. (C) Once of the most savvy and experienced party members we met with was Artur Lalazarian, a member of the opposition Republic Party. Artur recounted at length problems he had witnessed during previous elections, including policemen turning back buses carrying Republic Party members, and party representatives being denied venues for meetings. However, when we asked about this election, Lalazarian said that while he expected the situation to worsen in the days leading up to the election, the party had not experienced any major problems yet in the region. What problems they had experienced, he said, were a result of residual fear from previous fraudulent elections, and not the product of an order from above. For example, he said the Republic Party had had trouble finding office space because people were scared to rent to the party, but not because they had been ordered not to provide them with space. Lalazarian also told

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us that he believed the opposition was not ready for a revolution, but that he hoped it would unite and be ready for one by the time of the 2008 presidential election.

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GREATER INTEREST IN VOTER REGISTRATION LIST  
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15. (C) People on all sides of the political spectrum agreed that voters were better informed about the procedure to check their names on the voter registration list, and that more voters were checking their registration. Governor Grigoryan told us voters had actively been checking the lists. The mayor of Sevan said his office had purchased television advertisements urging people to check the registration list, and that several people had already reported problems with the list, meaning that many people were checking their registration.

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ECONOMIC SITUATION DISMAL, BUT NO SPECIFIC PLANS TO FIX IT  
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16. (C) A second issue on which virtually all of our interlocutors agreed was that the biggest problem in the region was the socio-economic situation. When we approached citizens of Gavar and Sevan, the first thing we were told was that the socio-economic situation was awful, and that everyone was leaving to work abroad. A group of elderly men in Gavar told us that the economy was non-existent, and that, though there had been 10 factories in the region, none of them were operational. They told us they would definitely vote, but that they had not decided for whom, since there was no chance the election would change anything, and it was hard to choose among the more than 20 parties running. Three older women running a stand at a local Sevan market had very similar complaints. They too told us the economic situation

was abysmal, and complained that all of their family members had left to work abroad. They too said that they would vote, but that they did not believe the election would improve the situation.

17. (C) Party representatives and government officials also pointed to the socio-economic situation as the biggest problem in the region, but none were able to provide us with details on how they planned to improve the situation. The Sevan mayor had more of a plan than most -- he said he wanted to develop tourism associated with the lake. However, when asked how he would do this, he could not provide details. The Prosperous Armenia representatives in Sevan also pointed to the socio-economic situation as the region's largest problem. When asked what the party planned to do about the situation, he said it would make Armenia "prosperous." When pressed for specifics, the representative leafed through his copy of a standard Prosperous Armenia brochure, and fruitlessly tried to find an answer there.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) Although opposition parties repeated the now-familiar mantra of allegations against pro-governmental forces for the abuse of administrative resources--which doubtless contain elements of truth--we were struck by how vague and unsubstantiated these arguments were. More noteworthy still, perhaps, was that the veteran hardline opposition Republic Party campaigner had nothing specific to report by way of election irregularities this cycle, contenting himself with recycling (legitimate) old grievances. The clearest message of the visit was that the socio-economic situation in Gegarkhunik is in dire straits; a situation about which all political parties were surprisingly silent. Voters, accordingly, were non-plussed by the choices available to them at the ballot box; planning to vote more out of civic obligation than any expectation that it would make any real difference to them who controls the parliament.  
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